



2. Encourage employees to speak up

Challenge

Fear of retaliation (or social isolation) is the main reason for employees to keep quiet; a culture of integrity with proactive, courageous, 'tjelling' employees who dare to raise sensitive issues greatly reduces fraud and improves safety.

'Tjellen' is a new verb, derived from the English word 'challenge' and coined by Muel Kaptein: "...to raise and discuss important issues in an open, constructive and thought-provoking manner... where values and norms are at stake and interests of individuals are at stake"[1].

An organisation has a lot to gain if employees feel free to raise suspicions of code of conduct violations; that way, an organisation can clear its own 'time bombs' before they go off. The challenge is that a different, more open culture takes a lot of time and effort, from all involved.

Solution

Start by creating support for this vision by:

- Encouraging emphasis from HR on respect, learning from mistakes and an inclusive work environment;
- Promoting respect and responsibility in the code of conduct;
- Focusing on exemplary behaviour in annual appraisals (the company should also reward this financially);
- Ensuring that voicing doubts, asking critical questions and dissent are valued within the organisation;
- Ensuring that people who will not readily speak up in groups, also have their say;
- Organising dissent by designating employees who may "play the advocate's devil" in certain projects or discussions at set times;
- Looking for "good practices" of organisations that are already further along.

Furthermore, place the degree of 'tjelling' (raising concerns) within organisational units as a recurring item on the MT agenda. Low levels of 'tjelling' do not automatically mean things are going well; it could also mean that the culture is too closed or fearful.



Actors

- Management
- Compliance together with HR and communication
- Possibly the audit committee that can insist on taking action on the basis of the new Corporate Governance Code (or preferably: on the basis of a culture survey)

Techniques

Look for examples of 'mono'-like cultures with tunnel vision, both within your own organisation and outside, and collect published 'disasters' or incidents that resulted (e.g. the fear cultures at Imtech, Wells Fargo, Volkswagen) and communicate about them; also look for positive experiences with 'tjelling' in your own organisation and share those too. Should you be unable to find any, search outside. Think of an attentive passenger who pointed out to a fellow passenger on the bus that she 'forgot' to pay; a customer at AH who pointed out to another customer that she left her change; or an employee of the finance department who asks someone else to reconsider a claim because the claim is probably at odds with the spirit of an internal policy on gifts and entertainment.

Convince HR that inclusive work environments and respect in the workplace produce much better results; let managers see that the quality of output and the atmosphere improve enormously if employees feel heard and are allowed to actively contribute to improvements - this is only possible if employees feel 'safe' to do so; organise dissent at regular intervals or on projects that lend themselves to it to gather evidence for this vision. Also encourage learning from mistakes and errors and talking about them.

Despite wanting to encourage employees to speak up, we cannot ignore hard facts: in Europe, 58% of all reports are made anonymously [2], and 40% of those reports turn out to be wholly or partially true. Therefore, never forget to always allow and facilitate anonymous reporting: you would miss many reports if you make it impossible. (For this subject, also read our tool on reporting procedures: encourage employees to make reports, not only about (serious) abuses and integrity incidents but any suspicion of a violation of the code of conduct; read more under tool 27. "Provide a speak up procedure")

Role Compliance Professional

Organize, convince, create support, especially towards HR and the Communication department. Review and collect hard data to substantiate it.

Footnote 1: M. Kaptein, Why Good People Sometimes Do Bad Things, p. 16

Footnote 2: NavexGlobal 2021 Incident Management Benchmark Webinar